

It doesn't matter how hard you work – just how busy you look

Rory Sutherland



Look busy (image: iStock)

The behavioural scientist Dan Ariely once found himself chatting to a locksmith with a curious problem. The better he became at replacing locks, the less he got paid. In the early days, he explained, he might wrestle for hours with a jammed lock, but because his inexperience made his job look difficult, his customers would pay without demur, often adding a tip. Eventually, however, he became highly expert, and could fix the same problem in minutes. Now his customers resented paying his call-out fee, and never tipped him at all.

Thirty years ago, companies buying a mainframe computer soon outgrew their first machine. The firm would duly write an huge cheque to a hardware provider to upgrade their struggling Zogvac 701a to a mighty Zogvac 709c. An engineer carrying fancy equipment would arrive at their premises and lock himself in the computer room for the day. What his hosts never knew was that their mainframe supplier, anticipating this upgrade, had already supplied a Zogvac 709c when the original mainframe was installed; a few lines of code had been added to restrict its processing power to that of the feebler 701a. All the engineer needed to do was delete those lines of code, then read the newspaper for the next six hours. The time and equipment were all for show. The value created would have been no different

had he simply turned up, deleted the code and walked out two minutes later. But you can't charge £400,000 for that.

I recently suggested an idea to a client which cost about £30,000 to implement and which made millions of pounds. What did we get paid for this? Nothing. Yet had we produced exactly the same suggestion via a 'consulting project', in which 12 MBAs spent months compiling a tedious 400-page report recommending the same idea, we could have charged £3 million.

Something the locksmith had not grasped, but which the IT company and consulting firms understood all too well, is the role played by justifying bullshit in the modern economy. For every hour of economically productive work, ten must be spent in senseless activity to maintain the illusion that what you are doing is more difficult and labour intensive than it really is.

The great thing about proper capitalism is that it's like football: anybody can play and there's a lot of luck involved. It's also a game where theory and intellect are often less valuable than talent or experience. The problem this creates for an educated middle class with a high sense of entitlement is that, in an open field, they would have to compete with everyone else. So to shore up their earnings and social position, educated people create the illusion that their work is like chess — a highly theoretical, abstract game whose mysteries are accessible only to a cognitive elite. Much of the apparatus of higher education serves not to impart useful skills, but to maintain the moral legitimacy of middle-class jobs and salaries.

The problem with being working class is that people only pay you to do things which are actually useful. You don't find scaffolders randomly erecting scaffolding where it isn't needed. Middle-class people, on the other hand, can easily generate their own bullshit. In an IT-packed office environment, lots of moronic activities look indistinguishable from productive work. Any time saved through being good at your job is spent signalling your busyness by spreadsheet-tweaking or filling in compliance forms.

If this phenomenon worries you as much as it worries me, I can recommend David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs* and Mario Fabbrì's *The Imaginary Economy* as poolside reading. With a warning, however: their theories are so depressingly plausible that you probably won't return to work.

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